

Separated in a Surveillance State: A Case Study of the Lived Experiences of Uyghur Families in Xinjiang's 'Re-education' Camps



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Background & Purpose

Within the past decade, over one million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities have been arbitrarily detained as part of China's campaign of political 're-education' and mass internment in Xinjiang. Amnesty International (2012) reports that after the 2009 Urumqi riots, Chinese authorities have intensified their crackdown on Uyghurs through mass arrests, enforced disappearances, and restrictions on religious and cultural expression.

Research questions:

- 1) How do Uyghurs in Xinjiang describe their family relations while living in or alongside 're-education' camps?
- 2) How does state surveillance shape Uyghur family relations in Xinjiang through the mechanisms of biopower and necropolitics?

Using a case-study approach and interviews, this honours thesis explores the lived experiences of the victims and their family members affected by Xinjiang's 're-education' camps. The findings indicate that the respondents face not only human rights abuses within the camps, but also other forms of repression that go beyond assumptions of violence. Drawing on victims' experiences, this research theoretically expands on biopower, state of exception, necropolitics, panoptic surveillance, and securitization. Overall, this paper argues that family separation and the concept of 're-education' with surveillance can be a preliminary step toward sovereign violence.

Literature Review

Religious Populism and Xenophobia

The conflict in Xinjiang is deeply intertwined with issues of ethnic and religious identity. In recent decades, the Chinese government has implemented increasingly stringent restrictions on any activities deemed to fall outside the scope of permitted manifestations of religious beliefs (Holder, 2021). As Holder (2021) points out, the Party-state has ostensibly been doing so to mitigate the posed threats of "the 'three evils' of separatism, terrorism and religious extremism" in the region (p. 771).

Extremism and Terrorism

In the early 2000s, Uyghurs were labeled as a 'terrorist threat' not because of anything they did, but as a result of a politically driven effort by the PRC, which successfully lobbied the U.S. to endorse this classification (Roberts, 2020a). The PRC strategically used this label to justify repression, while the vague definition of enemies in the U.S.-led Global War on Terror facilitated its acceptance (Roberts, 2020a).

Dispossession and Disappearances

To my knowledge, no scholarly research has examined such family relation of victims in Xinjiang to date. Formerly based in Xinjiang, scholar Bunin (2018) created an online platform (shahit.biz) to record volunteer testimonies of Uyghurs and other ethnic minority victims who have disappeared.

Securitization and Surveillance

The use of surveillance for social categorization enhances the Chinese government's visibility of the Uyghur population (Kam & Clarke, 2021). This enables a systematic and conscious form of control that ensures the automatic operation of power, in the name of securitization. The state implements surveillance power efficiently by sorting different races or citizenships as either desirable or undesirable populations (Lyon, 2009).



Image source: Human Rights Watch

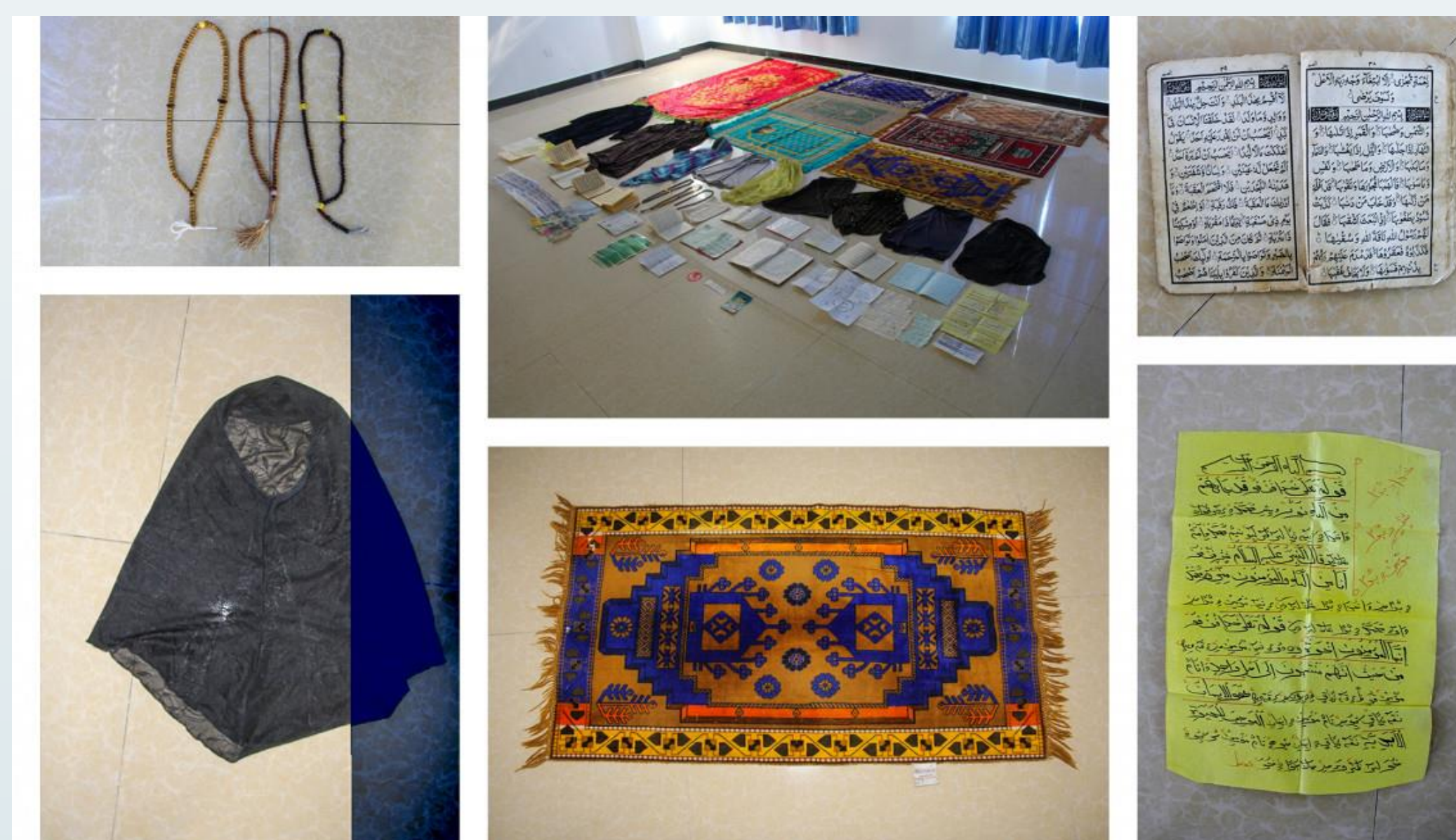
Theory & Methods

Biopolitics and Biopower

In his lecture on biopolitics, Foucault (2008) described how on the basis of the new governmental reason, government no longer intervenes nor holds a direct hold on matters and people. Rather, the government can only exert a hold to the extent of legitimacy founded in law and reason. In doing so, the government intervenes insofar as the "interplay of interests" for common good and wealth of its collective (Foucault, 2008, p. 45).

Necropolitics and State of Exception

The concepts of biopolitics and necropolitics are indissociable. As an illustration, necropolitics is reminiscent of contemporary forms of subjugation to life to the power of death (Mbembe, 2019). Simply put, necropolitics states that social and political power can dictate a given group's right to either live or die. Mbembe (2019) alludes to French philosopher Michel Foucault's theory called biopower that can be seen as the sovereign power to control the population. Here, necropolitics is inferred to be an extension of Foucault's theory, because biopower and biopolitics lacks the nuance in explaining state-sponsored death.



The items confiscated by Chinese authorities include prayer mats, headscarves, religious texts and prayer beads [Xinjiang Police Files] (Image source: The New Arab)

Methodological Framework

I use Du Bois' pluriversal decolonial sociology and Said's tenets and representations of colonial knowledge. In engaging with such perspectives, I aim to holistically contribute to various perceptions, narratives, understandings, cultures, and histories of colonized people, promoting social justice and advocacy.

Research Method

- Secondary data analysis
- Narrative inquiry method
- Thematic analysis

Sampling Selection

This study draws on 12 qualitative interviews obtained from various reports published by the Xinjiang Victims Database (2024), Amnesty International (2021a; 2021b), and the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (UNCHR) (2022).

The sample group in this study will be selected based on the following criteria: 1) identifies as an Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, or other Turkic Muslim ethnicity; and 2) affected by the Xinjiang 're-education' camps.

Findings & Quotes

Image source: Amnesty International



Religious Freedom and the Criminalization of Belief

Throughout the interviews and testimonies, the respondents discussed different ways they were surveilled and prosecuted due to their religion. Practicing Islam through praying and owning Muslim paraphernalia, such as the Quran, head coverings, prayer beads and rugs were forbidden.

"we were burning everything at night — Korans, prayer rugs, traditional clothing. We burned them at night because we were afraid the satellites could see us during the day." — Shahidyam Memaova

Family Separation as a Strategy of State Violence

The systematic targeting of Uyghur families through state-led policies demonstrates how family separation functions as a deliberate strategy of repression. Many testimonies highlight the devastating effects of these separations, not only on those detained but also on their loved ones.

"Then they attacked me psychologically and said, "your mom died the other day and your dad will serve lifetime in prison. Your son was in hospital and he also died. Your daughter's eyes will remain crossed permanently, and she will be thrown into the streets because you cannot take care of them. Your family is torn apart because of you." This was very hard for a daughter and a mom to take. I felt a huge sense of guilt and worthlessness." — Mihrigül Tursun

Prison System as 'Re-education'

The most common shared experience among respondents in the prison system is the authority over their body and citizenship. Shared experiences include having their clothing taken off, being denied medical treatment, body searches, blood samples, and corporal punishment. In this light, the prison system in Xinjiang operates as a mechanism of ideological control and coercion under the guise of 're-education.'

"The Chinese government's systematic abuse of Uyghurs inside and outside the camps demonstrate that it thinks it is too powerful to be held accountable for its crime to eliminate the Uyghurs as a people. I still remember the words of the Chinese authorities when I asked what my crime was. They said, 'you being an Uyghur is a crime.'" — Mihrigül Tursun



Members of Uyghur community living in Turkey stage a protest outside the Chinese consulate in Istanbul, on June 2, 2021 (Image source: Independent UK)

Discussion & Conclusion

The results from my study indicate that there does continue to be a code of self-surveillance within the respondents' communities and that Chinese state surveillance shape Uyghur family relations in Xinjiang through the mechanisms of biopower and necropolitics.

Self-Surveillance and Social Control

My findings are consistent with previous testimonies from reports on this topic, although my study provides more nuance as to how this phenomenon presents itself in the context of these participants' experiences in Xinjiang (see Amnesty International, 2021a/2021b; UNHCR, 2022). I argue here that because I observed self-surveillance from the data, then disciplinary power is working and that panoptic surveillance is used to control the population.



Image source: Image: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan

In biopolitics, sovereignty has thus shifted its political logic from destroying life to sustaining life (Ogasawara, 2019). Despite the ill-treatment and executions of Uyghur detainees, their lives are also sustained for the sake of 're-education'. Biopower thereby sheds light on the expansion of surveillance within nation-states. Furthermore, it serves as a regulatory mechanism for controlling populations, and in the Uyghurs' case, the ethnic cleansing of that population.



A police officer stands guard as Muslims arrive for the Eid al-Fitr morning prayer at the Id Kah Mosque in Xinjiang, on June 26, 2017 (Image source: Johannes Esale/AFP via Getty Images)

Cultural Erasure and National Identity

The concept of re-education enforced by the Chinese government is seen to some as not the direct punishment, but rather assimilation. However, I argue that re-education is not the direct exertion of state violence, because violence is taking place in parallel to indirect surveillance, such as self-surveillance. With biopower, China's government makes it possible to intervene in the collective being rather than the individual. However, I put forth that the state of exception and necropolitics allow this to happen. Although China's campaign of political 're-education' can be perceived as non-violent, I maintain that the state's surveillance is in fact a replacement of violence. In order to understand the surveillance as violence mechanism, I discuss how China's repression of Uyghurs is moreso about the matter of life or death.

Implications

In sum, this study's findings provided a critical lens to understand the human impact of state control and surveillance practices, which often remain abstract in broader policy or technical analyses. In doing so, this study bridged a significant gap in the literature by centering the lived experiences of victims, contributing to a more holistic understanding of surveillance and its socio-cultural effects.

The persecution of the Uyghurs in China is an undeniable act of ethnic cleansing. While it is neither unprecedented in history nor necessarily the most severe human tragedy of the twenty-first century, it remains a crisis of global significance that demands an international response. We must address how surveillance infrastructures can be weaponized to perpetuate human rights abuses, and the findings call for global accountability mechanisms to prevent such practices. For practitioners, particularly those in human rights advocacy, this study offered evidence to support interventions aimed at supporting affected communities and raising awareness of the broader societal impacts of surveillance.

Ultimately, this research theoretically expanded our understanding of surveillance states by framing them not only merely as tools of repression but also as practices that systematically dismantle social cohesion. In conclusion, this project contributed to the urgent global discourse on human rights and state power, emphasizing the need to protect minorities from similar forms of systemic oppression and future genocides.

Acknowledgements

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Link to paper, references, & resources:
<https://linktr.ee/separatedinasurveillancestate>

